

# **The influence of western patronage on authenticity of contemporary**

## **East African visual arts**

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This study uncovers the influence of the western patronage on authenticity of contemporary East African visual arts in the current practices. Not only had the previous related studies ignored the possible influence but had also overlooked the fact that different stakeholders could have varied perspectives on the western patronage and the concept of authenticity. Therefore, characteristics that determine the western conception of authenticity were identified; how East African visual arts practitioners conceive the concept of authenticity was explored and dealers' criteria for selecting and selling of contemporary East African visual arts were established. To fulfil its objectives, scholars, patrons, collectors, gallery managers, curators, formally trained artists and informally trained artists from Dar es Salaam, Kampala and Nairobi totalling sixty-seven were purposively selected and interviewed. Naivety, self-taughtness and non-exposure which are directly related to early western patrons' conception of authenticity were found out to be major features in current visual arts practices. It was also found out that authenticity among scholars and a few formally trained artists was perceived through honesty in production of the artworks which could communicate through culturally identifiable form and content. On the contrary, artworks remained inauthentic among patrons, art collectors, and gallery managers until these practitioners heard the "story" about the artist. Equally, among informally trained artists artworks remained inauthentic until they heard from their western audience whose superior criterion for collecting and selling of "authentic" visual arts was found to be the artists' distinctiveness from western art practices. To conclude, conceptions of early western patrons greatly influence authenticity in the current art practices and are perpetuated by deceitful art dealers whose aim is to capture attention of the western clientele whose perception about Africa has not been updated. Unfortunately, the resulting art is basically client-driven and it is a misrepresentation of the contemporary Africa. To reverse the situation, local patronage should be encouraged, authenticity ought to be redefined, practical and experimental art needs be integrated into mainstream education and the misinformed western audience has to be educated.